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AUTHOR McGee, Shawn L.
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ABSTRACT

Among the communication skills needed for business and industry are the ability to (1) express logical ideas in an organized fashion in public address, small group, and interpersonal contexts; (2) analyze receiver needs and adapt to those needs; (3) write thoughts in a correct and concise manner; (4) listen actively; (5) conduct thorough research; (6) think in a reflective, problem-solving manner; (7) interact in a flexible manner; (8) discover new ways of looking at an issue; (9) find the right medium or media for relating an idea; and (10) understand the nonverbal and verbal behavior of others. The best way to develop these communication skills is through realistic practice and application of theory gained in the classroom. Instructors should make sure their students are getting the most out of internship opportunities and provide time for students to evaluate and assess their internship experiences. Another way of further developing communication skills in students is by controlling more specifically major/minor selections and combinations. Finally, at every available opportunity, the private and public sector should seek out channels to develop partnership arrangements with higher education. (HOD)

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# "COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY"

**a panel presentation at the**
**Michigan Association of Speech Communication Convention**
**October 11, 1985**

**Position Paper by:**

**Shawn L. McGee**
**Executive Speechwriter**
**Michigan Bell Telephone**

Two years ago teaching was my life. I loved it. I believed in it. It made me feel good and my mom proud.

Today, teaching is my hobby. I love it. I believe in it. I only do it part-time. But, it makes me feel good. The fact that I'm still doing it confuses my mom. But, nonetheless, I don't think I'm any less of a teacher.

Call it brain drain, educational exodus, or simple selling-out -- I'm one of the criminals. I left.

People ask me why. I want to say, "I was tired of avoiding first person pronouns when writing "scholarly works." As you can hear/see, I'm no longer tired.

True confessions. The real reason I left had nothing to do with money or burn-out; it had everything to do with curiosity and a little self-doubt.

I wondered and worried if indeed I could use all that I thought I'd learned over the years. I knew I could teach others how to use what they'd learned. Former students -- left and right -- were becoming lawyers, public relations specialists, doctors, actors, and yes, even teachers. But what about me ? I simply didn't know if I had the skills that were needed "out there." Simply, I didn't know what skills were needed.

I have to believe that after awhile every teacher catches her/himself saying, "You'll use this someday" and not really knowing whether or not that is truth or fantasy. I caught myself.

A year and a half later, I have the opportunity to offer one woman's perspective. I don't know what <u>all</u> is needed. But, I do know that I was much better prepared than I'd ever imagined. And, I also know that I could have done an even better job of preparing myself.

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Let me first offer a synopsis of what skills I think are needed and which skills I use. Then, I'll offer some thoughts on how we might better develop them in our students and in ourselves. Throughout, I think you'll get a flavor of what I do. I think you'll also get some of my ideas on what career opportunities are out there for communication specialists.

## Communication skills needed and used

Listing the skills needed is quite simple. Ten thoughts:

1) the ability to verbally express logical ideas in an organized fashion in public address, small group and interpersonal contexts;

2) the ability to analyze receiver needs and adapt to those needs;

3) the ability to write your thoughts in a correct and concise manner;

4) the ability to actively listen;

5) the ability to do thorough research;

6) the ability to think in a reflective, problem-solving manner;

7) the ability to interact in a flexible manner;

8) the ability to discover new ways of looking at an issue;

9) the ability to find the right medium or media to relate an idea;

10) the ability to understand the non-verbal and verbal behavior of others.

Some might think that those are not purely communication skills. It depends on your perspective. I would argue that anyone trained as a communication specialist would see all of the above as communication-related skills.

In regard to what I use -- with varying degrees of success -- all of the above.

In my work as an executive speechwriter I find all of the above skills essential. In my work as a communication trainer and facilitator, I find many of the above to be critical and all of the above to come in handy from time-to-time.

I'm not going to belabor or footnote the point, but there's widespread research that supports the notion that the dynamic changes that are occurring in organizations today demand skills similar to the ones I've listed. A good communicator, I would argue, is generally a good participative, involving manager. And truly, with few exceptions, that is the kind of flexible management style that is most desirable in the unusual times which all organizations face today.

**Developing communication skills**

I believe that the best way to develop the communication skills I've described is through realistic practice and application of theory gained in the classroom. Yes, I believe the theory must be taught first and taught last. However, I also believe that if students do not apply that theory while still in school -- through an internship, job or extra-curricular activity -- they will not have sufficient opportunity to question the strengths and weaknesses of that theory.

An example illustrates my point. A student learns about Theory X and Theory Y. (S)he knows what McGregor meant. (S)he knows how various companies have applied those theories throughout the years. (S)he doesn't know if she can apply those theories her/himself with any degree of success.

If that student had the opportunity to try it or observe it her/himself through an internship for example, (s)he could then return to the classroom and say "Whoa, it ain't as simple as it looks. Why didn't it work ?" Granted, through trial and error that same learning process could occur after graduation, but why not get the "complete" educational experience while still in school ?

I believe that we need to make sure our students are getting the most out of internship opportunities. Vital to that is going back in the classroom <u>after</u> the internship and spending some real time evaluating, assessing and letting it all sink in before the student moves on or graduates. Internship experiences cannot be simply a paper passing, paper signing experience. Think of what could be gained by simply gathering all of a department's interns together for one week at the end of each semester. A lot of experiences could be shared. A lot of questions could be answered. A lot of good could be realized.

I also believe that as instructors it may sometimes be worth a few months of our summer vacation to arrange a partnership learning experience with a business. For example, a high school journalism teacher might seek out a summer "internship" in a large corporation's media relations department. Such an adventure I believe could surely enrich the quality of instruction offered the following September.

Another way of further developing communication skills in students is by what I'll call more specifically controlling major/minor selections and combinations. I know that at some colleges and universities if a student wants to major in speech (s)he must minor in English.

I believe that if a student wants to major in public relations or organizational communication (s)he should be required to minor in business or marketing. I don't believe that one or two classes folded into a curriculum is enough. If a student wants to major in journalism, perhaps (s)he should be required to minor in political science or economics. These thoughts are not offered in a prescriptive manner. The combinations would have to vary depending on the curriculum available at the university or college which is being attended.

The point is a student does not get enough broad and realistic exposure by majoring in speech and minoring in mass communication, for example. That is a sure-fire prescription for becoming a technician, not necessarily a professional practitioner.

My intention here is to suggest that if it is indeed our desire to better prepare students for non-academic careers then we -- as educators -- have a responsibility to better direct them toward concentrations that reflect the changing nature of our times and the future needs of business and industry.

A word or two about extra-curricular activities -- namely debate and forensics. Without a doubt, these two activities equipped me with more of the skills necessary to do the job that I love today than anything else that I did. I learned how to compete in a confident manner beyond learning many of the specific skills that I acquired and discussed previously. In general, I think most former forensic-types could make a similar claim. It's a real good activity.

But, I must add that as educators we need to make sure that debate and forensics continue to realistically prepare our students. I might sound too cynical, but I believe that we are doing an injustice to our students if we encourage them -- for example -- to explore subjects such as toilets and tree bark as "excellent topics for their next informative or persuasive speech." I'm all for creativity and fun. I'm all for learning. But, I believe that you can learn just as much giving a speech on the laws governing corporate take-overs as you can from giving a speech on toilets. Actually, I believe you can learn more. Finally in regard to debate, I realize that a nuclear war that leads to the end of us all is a doggone realistic threat; but, I fail to see the link more times than I see it.

Let's not take those words as words of criticism. Rather, they're words of reaffirmation. The activities of debate and forensics are inherently good. They provide excellent opportunities for the realistic application of theory and the development of skills. We just need to make sure our students are thinking about it in a similar manner.

I must offer a final, general -- but critical -- point about developing needed communication skills for business and industry. At every available opportunity, the private and public sector alike should seek out channels to develop partnership arrangements. The only way that any of us can know what's needed "out there" is to somehow be out there. It's not enough to just read and think about it. We must nurture the interdependence between business and academia.

One starting point is for this organization to use this evening's program as a starting point. I believe that it benefits all of us to talk and exchange ideas. I believe there is interest and opportunity to have more than one program that brings in us strange, non-academic types. Just a thought.

Naive as it may have been, when I was teaching full-time I often viewed corporate America as "the bad guys" who were just waiting to get their capitalistic, greedy, big hands on all of those pure, innocent and skilled minds that I had helped develop. Sure, there are a few "bad guys and gals" out there; but, my experience so far says there are a lot more real good ones.